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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000392

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KN KS

SUBJECT: POLITICAL BATTLES CONTINUE, PRIME MINISTER NOT YET  
CONFIRMED

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Blue House and the National Assembly are in a staring match and it appears the UDP has no reason to blink. With nothing to lose, the UDP has delayed putting the PM-designate Han Seung-soo's nomination to a vote in the plenary and they have the necessary 150 votes (141 seats plus 9 in the left-wing DLP) to delay the vote indefinitely. Rather than risk being accused of holding up state affairs, a deal will likely be struck where one or two of Lee's minister-designates will withdraw their nomination in exchange for a vote on Prime Minister-designate Han Seung-soo's candidacy. The UDP must flex its muscle ahead of the April 9 elections to show they can play a legitimate opposition role. So far, so good. Lee has played into their hands with several questionable nominees but if he shows willingness to compromise, as he did over the government reorganization plan, Lee could emerge with minimal damage. The brouhaha shows its politics as usual, but the conservatives are now on the receiving end. End Summary

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MOU Nominee in Jeopardy  
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¶2. (SBU) The opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) as well as some GNP lawmakers have called for the Blue House to withdraw MOU minister-designate Nam Joo-hong's nomination because of his hard-line views toward North Korea, dual U.S./ROK nationality of his children, allegations of past tax evasion, and suspicious property deals by his wife. His National Assembly hearing has not been scheduled yet, and the progressive UDP said they would boycott the hearing even if it were held. The Blue House pledged to take a closer look at the controversial nominees and press reports note the Blue House could replace Nam and one or two others, so the cabinet can be put in place.

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Others At Risk as Well?  
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¶3. (SBU) Other nominees involved in controversies include: Minister of Environment-nominee Park Eun-kyung for speculative property deals and track record of her tax evasion; Culture Minister-nominee Yoo In-chon for questionable means in amassing his roughly 15 million dollar

fortune; Health/Welfare Minister-designate Kim Sung-yi for alleged cooperation with the authoritarian Chun Doo-hwan government; and Ministry of Labor-nominee Lee Young-hee for falsifying qualifications. Several of the male nominees have been accused of dodging their military service. Though not subject to a National Assembly hearing, Senior Blue House Social Policy Secretary-designate Park Mee-seok has also been attacked for alleged plagiarism. Since GNP Chairman Kang Jae-sup has requested the Blue House reconsider some of the nominees so that the cabinet can be formed, it seems likely one or two, perhaps Nam and MOE nominee Park, will be sacrificed so that PM-designate Han's nomination can be ratified and the cabinet can take office.

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Confirmation Process  
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¶4. (SBU) The Prime Minister must be approved by a majority with majority attendance (at least 150 of 299 present and at least 51 percent of those voting). Only the Prime Minister requires National Assembly consent, while Cabinet Members only need "review" by a committee. The respective standing committees report to the plenary on the outcome of the nominees' hearings. Even if the committee does not approve the minister, the minister can still be appointed by the president. (NOTE: Therefore the opposition is calling for a withdrawal of nomination for certain candidates, while the GNP argues that all matters should be debated at the hearings. END NOTE) The reports are then sent over to the President by the NA Speaker (Lim Chae-jung). The hearing and report to the plenary should take place within 20 days of the President's request for a hearing. After an additional 10

days, if the NA fails to send the President a report, the President can appoint the nominee anyway. (NOTE: The problem despite the rather generous deadline is that the President would have difficulty convening his first Cabinet meeting by the end of Feb as he planned, should the hearing process be derailed for some of the more controversial candidates, for lack in 15-member quorum set out in the Constitution.)

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Outlook  
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¶5. (SBU) Most pundits agree the holdup of PM-designate Han Seung-soo's nomination is related directly to the National Assembly elections April 9, but also note the situation partially stemmed from the Blue House's hasty announcement of the nominees without extensive screening. The Blue House has acknowledged that unless it withdraws at least one nominee, the PM confirmation may further be delayed, cause a prolonged vacuum in state affairs, and undermine preparations for the April 9 election. Regarding the postponed PM confirmation vote, UDP leader Sohn Hak-kyu said, "My party will function as a firm opposition that fulfills its responsibility. What criteria could we possibly set for the Cabinet Ministers in hearings, when we have already approved a questionable Prime Minister, who is the head of the Cabinet?"

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Comment  
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¶6. (C) Currently, Roh-administration ministers are still in office pending the confirmation of the Prime Minister and hearings for the ministers. While this seems like a recipe for disaster, this arrangement likely will not greatly affect management of state affairs. The delayed hearings will likely have a greater impact on the political conversation ahead of the April elections rather than any short, or long-term affect on Lee's ability to govern. Both the UDP and the Blue House must show they have the voters' interests in mind and therefore a compromise is likely in the coming days to allow Lee's first cabinet to convene.

VERSHBOW